

THREE-DIMENSIONAL WELL SYSTEM
FOR ACCESSING SUBTERRANEAN ZONES

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application is a continuation of U.S. Application Serial No. 10/244,083 filed September 12, 2002 and entitled "Three-Dimensional Well System for Accessing Subterranean Zones".

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TECHNICAL FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates generally to systems and methods for the recovery of subterranean resources and, more particularly, to a three-dimensional well system for accessing subterranean zones.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Subterranean deposits of coal often contain substantial quantities of entrained methane gas. Limited production and use of methane gas from coal deposits has occurred for many years. Substantial obstacles, however, have frustrated more extensive development and use of methane gas deposits in coal seams. The foremost problem in producing methane gas from coal seams is that while coal seams may extend over large areas of up to several thousand acres, the coal seams are not very thick, varying from a few inches to several meters thick. Thus, while the coal seams are often relatively near the surface, vertical wells drilled into the coal deposits for obtaining methane gas can only drain a fairly small radius around the coal deposits. Further, coal deposits may not be amenable to pressure fracturing and other methods often used for increasing methane gas production from rock formations. As a result, once the gas easily drained from a vertical well in a coal seam is produced, further production is limited in volume. Additionally, coal seams are often associated with subterranean water, which typically must be drained from the coal seam in order to produce the methane.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a three-dimensional well system for accessing subterranean zones that substantially eliminates or reduces the disadvantages and problems associated with previous systems and methods. In particular, certain 5 embodiments of the present invention provide a three-dimensional well system for accessing subterranean zones for efficiently producing and removing entrained methane gas and water from multiple coal seams.

In accordance with one embodiment of the present invention, a method is provided for accessing a plurality of subterranean zones from the surface. The method 10 includes forming an entry well from the surface and forming two or more exterior drainage wells from the entry well through the subterranean zones. The exterior drainage wells each extend outwardly and downwardly from the entry well for a first distance and then extend downwardly for a second distance. Each exterior drainage well passes through a plurality of the subterranean zones and is operable to drain fluid 15 from the plurality of the subterranean zones.

In accordance with another embodiment of the present invention, a drainage system for accessing a plurality of subterranean zones from the surface includes an entry well extending from the surface. The system also includes two or more exterior drainage wells extending from the entry well through the subterranean zones. The 20 exterior drainage wells each extend outwardly and downwardly from the entry well for a first distance and then extend downwardly for a second distance. Each exterior drainage well passes through a plurality of the subterranean zones and is operable to drain fluid from the plurality of the subterranean zones.

Embodiments of the present invention may provide one or more technical 25 advantages. These technical advantages may include providing a system and method for efficiently accessing one or more subterranean zones from the surface. Such embodiments provide for uniform drainage of fluids or other materials from these subterranean zones using a single surface well. Furthermore, embodiments of the present invention may be useful for extracting fluids from multiple thin sub-surface 30 layers (whose thickness makes formation of a horizontal drainage well and/or pattern

in the layers inefficient or impossible). Fluids may also be injected into one or more subterranean zones using embodiments of the present invention.

Other technical advantages of the present invention will be readily apparent to one skilled in the art from the figures, descriptions, and claims included herein.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

For a more complete understanding of the present invention and its advantages, reference is now made to the following description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein like numerals represent like parts, in which:

FIGURE 1 illustrates an example three-dimensional drainage system in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 2 illustrates an example three-dimensional drainage system in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

FIGURE 3 illustrates a cross-section diagram of the example three-dimensional drainage system of FIGURE 2;

FIGURE 4 illustrates an entry well and an installed guide tube bundle;

FIGURE 5 illustrates an entry well and an installed guide tube bundle as drainage wells are about to be drilled;

FIGURE 6 illustrates an entry well and an installed guide tube bundle as a drainage well is being drilled;

FIGURE 7 illustrates the drilling of a drainage well from an entry well using a whipstock;

FIGURE 8 illustrates an example method of drilling and producing from an example three-dimensional drainage system; and

FIGURE 9 illustrates a nested configuration of multiple three-dimensional drainage systems.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

FIGURE 1 illustrates an example three-dimensional drainage system 10 for accessing multiple subterranean zones 20a-20d (hereinafter collectively referred to as subterranean zones 20) from the surface. In the embodiment described below, 5 subterranean zones 20 are coal seams; however, it will be understood that other subterranean formations can be similarly accessed using drainage system 10. Furthermore, although drainage system 10 is described as being used to remove and/or produce water, hydrocarbons and other fluids from zones 20, system 10 may also be used to treat minerals in zones 20 prior to mining operations, to inject or 10 introduce fluids, gases, or other substances into zones 20, or for any other suitable purposes.

Drainage system 10 includes an entry well 30 and multiple drainage wells 40. Entry well 30 extends from a surface towards subterranean zones 20, and drainage wells 40 extend from near the terminus of entry well 30 through one or more of the 15 subterranean zones 20. Drainage wells 40 may alternatively extend from any other suitable portion of entry well 30 or may extend directly from the surface. Entry well 30 is illustrated as being substantially vertical; however, it should be understood that entry well 30 may be formed at any suitable angle relative to the surface.

One or more of the drainage wells 40 extend outwardly and downwardly from 20 entry well 30 to form a three-dimensional drainage pattern that may be used to extract fluids from subterranean zones 20. Although the term "drainage well" is used, it should also be understood that these wells 40 may also be used to inject fluids into subterranean zones 20. One or more "exterior" drainage wells 40 are initially drilled 25 at an angle away from entry well 30 (or the surface) to obtain a desired spacing of wells 40 for efficient drainage of fluids from zones 20. For example, wells 40 may be spaced apart from one another such that they are uniformly spaced. After extending at an angle away from entry well 30 to obtain the desired spacing, wells 40 may extend substantially downward to a desired depth. A "central" drainage well 40 may also extend directly downwardly from entry well 30. Wells 40 may pass through 30 zones 20 at any appropriate points along the length of each well 40.

As is illustrated in the example system 10 of FIGURE 1, each well 40 extends downward from the surface and through multiple subterranean zones 20. In particular embodiments, zones 20 contain fluids under pressure, and these fluids tend to flow from their respective zone 20 into a well 40 passing through such a zone 20. A fluid 5 may then flow down a well 40 and collect at the bottom of the well 40. The fluid may then be pumped to the surface. In addition or alternatively, depending on the type of fluid and the pressure in the formation, a fluid may flow from a zone 20 to a well 40, and then upwardly to the surface. For example, coal seams 20 containing water and methane gas may be drained using wells 40. In such a case, the water may drain from 10 a coal seam 20 and flow to the bottom of wells 40 and be pumped to the surface. While this water is being pumped, methane gas may flow from the coal seam 20 into wells 40 and then upwardly to the surface. As is the case with many coal seams, once a sufficient amount of water has been drained from a coal seam 20, the amount of methane gas flowing to the surface may increase significantly.

15 In certain types of subterranean zones 20, such as zones 20 having low permeability, fluid is only able to effectively travel a short distance to a well 40. For example, in a low permeability coal seam 20, it may take a long period of time for water in the coal seam 20 to travel through the seam 20 to a single well drilled into the coal seam 20 from the surface. Therefore, it may also take a long time for the seam 20 to be sufficiently drained of water to produce methane gas efficiently (or such production may never happen). Therefore, it is desirable to drill multiple wells into a coal seam 20, so that water or other fluids in a particular portion of a coal seam or other zone 20 are relatively near to at least one well. In the past, this has meant 20 drilling multiple vertical wells that each extend from a different surface location; however, this is generally an expensive and environmentally unfriendly process. System 10 eliminates the need to drill multiple wells from the surface, while still providing uniform access to zones 20 using multiple drainage wells 40. Furthermore, system 10 provides more uniform coverage and more efficient extraction (or injection) of fluids than hydraulic fracturing, which has been used with limited 25 success in the past to increase the drainage area of a well bore.

Typically, the greater the surface area of a well 40 that comes in contact with a zone 20, the greater the ability of fluids to flow from the zone 20 into the well 40. One way to increase the surface area of each well 40 that is drilled into and/or through a zone 20 is to create an enlarged cavity 45 from the well 40 in contact with the zone 20. By increasing this surface area, the number of gas-conveying cleats or other fluid-conveying structures in a zone 20 that are intersected by a well 40 is increased. Therefore, each well 40 may have one or more associated cavities 45 at or near the intersection of the well 40 with a subterranean zone 20. Cavities 45 may be created using an underreaming tool or using any other suitable techniques.

In the example system 10, each well 40 is enlarged to form a cavity 45 where each well 40 intersects a zone 20. However, in other embodiments, some or all of wells 40 may not have cavities at one or more zones 20. For example, in a particular embodiment, a cavity 45 may only be formed at the bottom of each well 40. In such a location, a cavity 45 may also serve as a collection point or sump for fluids, such as water, which have drained down a well 40 from zones 20 located above the cavity 45. In such embodiments, a pump inlet may be positioned in the cavity 45 at the bottom of each well 40 to collect the accumulated fluids. As an example only, a Moyno pump may be used.

In addition to or instead of cavities 45, hydraulic fracturing or "fracing" of zones 20 may be used to increase fluid flow from zones 20 into wells 40. Hydraulic fracturing is used to create small cracks in a subsurface geologic formation, such as a subterranean zone 20, to allow fluids to move through the formation to a well 40.

As described above, system 10 may be used to extract fluids from multiple subterranean zones 20. These subterranean zones 20 may be separated by one or more layers 50 of materials that do not include hydrocarbons or other materials that are desired to be extracted and/or that prevent the flow of such hydrocarbons or other materials between subterranean zones 20. Therefore, it is often necessary to drill a well to (or through) a subterranean zone 20 in order to extract fluids from that zone 20. As described above, this may be done using multiple vertical surface wells. However, as described above, this requires extensive surface operations.

The extraction of fluids may also be performed using a horizontal well and/or drainage pattern drilled through a zone 20 and connected to a surface well to extract the fluids collected in the horizontal well and/or drainage pattern. However, although such a drainage pattern can be very effective, it is expensive to drill. Therefore, it 5 may not be economical or possible to drill such a pattern in each of multiple subterranean zones 20, especially when zones 20 are relatively thin.

System 10, on the other hand, only requires a single surface location and can be used to economically extract fluids from multiple zones 20, even when those zones 20 are relatively thin. For example, although some coal formations may comprise a 10 substantially solid layer of coal that is fifty to one hundred feet thick (and which might be good candidates for a horizontal drainage pattern), other coal formations may be made up of many thin (such as a foot thick) layers or seams of coal spaced apart from one another. While it may not be economical to drill a horizontal drainage pattern in each of these thin layers, system 10 provides an efficient way to extract 15 fluids from these layers. Although system 10 may not have the same amount of well surface area contact with a particular coal seam 20 as a horizontal drainage pattern, the use of multiple wells 40 drilled to or through a particular seam 20 (and possibly the use of cavities 45) provides sufficient contact with a seam 20 to enable sufficient extraction of fluid. Furthermore, it should be noted that system 10 may also be 20 effective to extract fluids from thicker coal seams or other zones 20 as well.

FIGURE 2 illustrates another example three-dimensional drainage system 110 for accessing multiple subterranean zones 20 from the surface. System 110 is similar to system 10 described above in conjunction with FIGURE 1. Thus, system 110 includes an entry well 130, drainage wells 140 formed through subterranean zones 20, and cavities 145. However, unlike system 10, the exterior drainage wells 140 of 25 system 110 do not terminate individually (like wells 40), but instead have a lower portion 142 that extends toward the central drainage well 140 and intersects a sump cavity 160 located in or below the deepest subterranean zone 20 being accessed. Therefore, fluids draining from zones 20 will drain to a common point for pumping to 30 the surface. Thus, fluids only need to be pumped from sump cavity 160, instead of

from the bottom of each drainage well 40 of system 10. Sump cavity 160 may be created using an undercutting tool or using any other suitable techniques.

FIGURE 3 illustrates a cross-section diagram of example three-dimensional drainage system 110, taken along line 3-3 as indicated in FIGURE 2. This figure 5 illustrates in further detail the intersection of drainage wells 140 with sump cavity 160. Furthermore, this figure illustrates a guide tube bundle 200 that may be used to aid in the drilling of drainage wells 140 (or drainage wells 40), as described below.

FIGURE 4 illustrates entry well 130 with a guide tube bundle 200 and an associated casing 210 installed in entry well 130. Guide tube bundle 200 may be 10 positioned near the bottom of entry well 130 and used to direct a drill string in one of several particular orientations for the drilling of drainage wells 140. Guide tube bundle 200 comprises a set of twisted guide tubes 220 (which may be joint casings) and a casing collar 230, as illustrated, and is attached to casing 210. As described 15 below, the twisting of joint casings 220 may be used to guide a drill string to a desired orientation. Although three guide tubes 220 are shown in the example embodiment, any appropriate number may be used. In particular embodiments, there is one guide tube 220 that corresponds to each drainage well 40 to be drilled.

Casing 210 may be any fresh water casing or other casing suitable for use in down-hole operations. Casing 210 and guide tube bundle 200 are inserted into entry 20 well 130, and a cement retainer 240 is poured or otherwise installed around the casing inside entry well 130. Cement retainer 240 may be any mixture or substance otherwise suitable to maintain casing 210 in the desired position with respect to entry well 130.

FIGURE 5 illustrates entry well 130 and guide tube bundle 200 as drainage wells 140 are about to be drilled. A drill string 300 is positioned to enter one of the guide tubes 220 of guide tube bundle 200. Drill string 300 may be successively directed into each guide tube 220 to drill a corresponding drainage well 40 from each guide tube 220. In order to keep drill string 300 relatively centered in entry well 130, a stabilizer 310 may be employed. Stabilizer 310 may be a ring and fin type stabilizer 30 or any other stabilizer suitable to keep drill string 300 relatively centered. To keep stabilizer 310 at a desired depth in entry well 130, a stop ring 320 may be employed.

Stop ring 320 may be constructed of rubber, metal, or any other suitable material. Drill string 300 may be inserted randomly into any of a plurality of guide tubes 220, or drill string 300 may be directed into a selected guide tube 220.

FIGURE 6 illustrates entry well 130 and guide tube bundle 200 as a drainage well 140 is being drilled. As is illustrated, the end of each guide tube 220 is oriented such that a drill string 300 inserted in the guide tube 220 will be directed by the guide tube in a direction off the vertical. This direction of orientation for each tube 220 may be configured to be the desired initial direction of each drainage well 140 from entry well 130. Once each drainage well 140 has been drilled a sufficient distance from entry well 130 in the direction dictated by the guide tube 220, directional drilling techniques may then be used to change the direction of each drainage well 140 to a substantially vertical direction or any other desired direction.

It should be noted that although the use of a guide tube bundle 200 is described, this is merely an example and any suitable technique may be used to drill drainage wells 140 (or drainage wells 40). For example, a whipstock may alternatively be used to drill each drainage well 140 from entry well 130, and such a technique is included within the scope of the present invention. If a whipstock is used, entry well 130 may be of a smaller diameter than illustrated since a guide tube bundle does not need to be accommodated in entry well 130. FIGURE 7 illustrates the drilling of a first drainage well 140 from entry well 130 using a drill string 300 and a whipstock 330.

FIGURE 8 illustrates an example method of drilling and producing fluids or other resources using three-dimensional drainage system 110. The method begins at step 350 where entry well 130 is drilled. At step 355, a central drainage well 140 is drilled downward from entry well 130 using a drill string. At step 360, a sump cavity 160 is formed near the bottom of central drainage well 140 and a cavity 145 is formed at the intersection of central drainage well 140 and each subterranean zone 20. At step 365, a guide tube bundle 200 is installed into entry well 130.

At step 370, a drill string 300 is inserted through entry well 130 and one of the guide tubes 220 in the guide tube bundle 200. The drill string 300 is then used to drill an exterior drainage well 140 at step 375 (note that the exterior drainage well 140 may

have a different diameter than central drainage well 140). As described above, once the exterior drainage well 140 has been drilled an appropriate distance from entry well 130, drill string 130 may be maneuvered to drill drainage well 140 downward in a substantially vertical orientation through one or more subterranean zones 20 (although 5 well 140 may pass through one or more subterranean zones 20 while non-vertical). Furthermore, in particular embodiments, wells 140 (or 40) may extend outward at an angle to the vertical. At step 380, drill string 300 is maneuvered such that exterior drainage well 140 turns towards central drainage well 140 and intersects sump cavity 160. Furthermore, a cavity 145 may be formed at the intersection of the exterior 10 drainage well 140 and each subterranean zone 20 at step 382.

At decisional step 385, a determination is made whether additional exterior drainage wells 140 are desired. If additional drainage wells 140 are desired, the process returns to step 370 and repeats through step 380 for each additional drainage well 140. For each drainage well 140, drill string 300 is inserted into a different guide 15 tube 220 so as to orient the drainage well 140 in a different direction than those already drilled. If no additional drainage wells 140 are desired, the process continues to step 390, where production equipment is installed. For example, if fluids are expected to drain from subterranean zones 20 to sump cavity 160, a pump may be installed in sump cavity 160 to raise the fluid to the surface. In addition or 20 alternatively, equipment may be installed to collect gases rising up drainage wells 140 from subterranean zones 20. At step 395, the production equipment is used to produce fluids from subterranean zones 20, and the method ends.

Although the steps have been described in a certain order, it will be understood that they may be performed in any other appropriate order. Furthermore, 25 one or more steps may be omitted, or additional steps performed, as appropriate.

FIGURE 9 illustrates a nested configuration of multiple example three-dimensional drainage systems 410. Each drainage system 410 comprises seven drainage wells 440 arranged in a hexagonal arrangement (with one of the seven wells 440 being a central drainage well 410 drilled directly downward from an entry well 430). Since drainage wells 440 are located subsurface, their outermost portion (that 30 which is substantially vertical) is indicated with an "x" in FIGURE 9. As an example

only, each system 410 may be formed having a dimension d_1 of 1200 feet and a dimension d_2 of 800 feet. However, any other suitable dimensions may be used and this is merely an example.

As is illustrated, multiple systems 410 may be positioned in relationship to one another to maximize the drainage area of a subterranean formation covered by systems 410. Due to the number and orientation of drainage wells 440 in each system 410, each system 410 covers a roughly hexagonal drainage area. Accordingly, system 410 may be aligned or "nested", as illustrated, such that systems 410 form a roughly honeycomb-type alignment and provide uniform drainage of a subterranean formation.

Although "hexagonal" systems 410 are illustrated, may other appropriate shapes of three-dimensional drainage systems may be formed and nested. For example, systems 10 and 110 form a square or rectangular shape that may be nested with other systems 10 or 110. Alternatively, any other polygonal shapes may be formed with any suitable number (even or odd) of drainage wells.

Although the present invention has been described with several embodiments, various changes and modifications may be suggested to one skilled in the art. It is intended that the present invention encompasses such changes and modifications as fall within the scope of the appended claims.